

the visionary }

MELANIE LUNDQUIST is a fervent believer in giving back to the community. Not just in this season of Thanksgiving, but all year—and all life—long. It's an attitude the Southern California philanthropist says she got from her mother: "She told me," Melanie says, "When you leave this world, it better be a better world." And that's a message that Melanie and her husband, Richard, have taken to heart, using their considerable resources to improve their community, particularly in the areas of education and health.

The Lundquists own Continental Development Corporation, which has built and managed premium hotel property, shopping plazas, and medical facilities throughout California, among many other commercial and retail real-estate ventures. They are also responsible for a \$50 million gift to the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, \$10 million to the Lundquist Cardiovascular Institute, plus \$3 million for additional ER beds and \$50 million for a new patient tower all at the Torrance Memorial Medical Center, as well as countless other pledges to institutions and initiatives in the region. Why? Says Melanie, "Richard and I support Warren Buffett's comment that this is society's money. We're temporary stewards."

PASSIONATE
DONOR AND
CO-OWNER OF
A REAL-ESTATE
DEVELOPMENT
COMPANY WITH
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RICHARD,
MELANIE
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THAT MAKE
THE MOST OF
PHILANTHROPIC
DOLLARS.

BY *Joan Tapper* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Lisa Romerein*

SCHOOL DAY
Melanie Lundquist
during a site visit
to 107th Street
Elementary/
Magnet School in
Los Angeles.



forthright, down-to-earth, enthusiastic, and proactive, Melanie is now stepping further into the limelight by advocating for a new kind of philanthropy that is in tune with our times. “There’s so much at stake in this country,” she says. “If someone has found a way to change systems, it should be shared. Entrepreneurs have creative and problem-solving skills. We need not just money, but also their expertise and a public-private partnership.”

Association, which founded a home for Jewish tuberculosis patients that eventually became the City of Hope. My mother went to college at USC in 1925 and joined the AEPHI sorority because she wanted to establish a dental clinic for impoverished kids. To this day it still exists, but in a slightly different form.

“My mother did a lot of fundraising for causes,” Melanie continues. “She was good at it, and when I was 7, I said, ‘I want to do what you’re doing.’ She took me over to, I think, March of Dimes. I had to sign for a can and went door-to-door on my block. I knocked on the door and asked for money...and I haven’t stopped since.”

She hasn’t been shy about fundraising for various nonprofit institutions, and when it comes to their own contributions, she and Richard don’t wait to be asked. Though they once preferred to donate anonymously, that changed in 2005, when the Torrance Memorial Medical Center wanted to establish a cardiovascular unit for \$10 million.

“I actually had been a volunteer at the med center for 11 years, from 1985 to 1996,” Melanie muses. “I was the little lady at the front desk on Thursdays from 4:00 to 7:00.” A decade later, the Lundquists were helping to find the right donor for the hospital when they decided to step up themselves. “I have a real thing about women’s heart health,” she explains. Then they threw in \$3 million to expand the ER, which was burdened with

Nowhere is that more obvious than in education, notes Melanie, who attended L.A. public schools. “I went to Riverside Drive Elementary, Millikan Middle School, and U.S. Grant High School, and I got a phenomenal education. But money is no longer there from the state.”

So in 2007 she signed on to help Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa establish the nonprofit Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, which was created to transform underserved schools and give those students a high-quality education. She and Richard pledged \$5 million a year for the next 10 years.

“The Partnership is in its ninth year,” she says, “and we’ve accomplished a lot. We’re doing something no one else is doing the way we’re doing it. It’s time to get the word out on the Partnership and philanthropy.”

nOW A RESIDENT of the South Bay, Melanie, 67 and a proud third-generation Angeleno on her father’s side, points to a family tradition of helping others. Her maternal grandparents, who emigrated from Poland around 1904, moved to Los Angeles when her mother was a few months old. “My grandfather became a business owner,” she says, “and a member of the L.A. Merchants’

additional patients as other hospitals closed. “At that point the hospital convinced us that if you’re going to benefit the community, you have to go public, so other people will follow.”

That’s why in 2013, when the Lundquists gave the funds for the patient tower, they agreed to put their name on it. Craig Leach, CEO of the Torrance Memorial Medical Center, says, “They gave \$50 million to name the tower. But when we made the announcement, they said, ‘This has a naming life of 25 years. And before that, if anyone is willing to give \$1 more than we did, they can take our name off.’ That is an unbelievable testament to having the community served. Most donors are approached for a specific purpose, but [the Lundquists] are proactive. Melanie wants to know how to improve health care positively. She asks, ‘How else can we help you serve the community better? What’s next?’”

That same sense of purpose has governed Melanie’s efforts on behalf of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools. The nonprofit organization, which operates under a memorandum of understanding with the Los Angeles Unified School District, manages 19 public elementary, middle, and high schools in Boyle Heights, South L.A., and Watts, serving 14,000 students out of more than 655,000 total in the 1,302-school district, the nation’s second largest.

“We cherry-pick schools from the bottom,” Melanie says. “If you want to push good things into a system, you have to work inside the system. It’s not easy, but I don’t like easy things. I want to solve the big things. It’s the hardest work you’ll ever do, but also the most gratifying.”

The keys to the program are innovative instructional leadership, community partnerships, and family engagement with an aim to educate college-ready students. Along with year-round professional development and more resources for teachers,

there's an emphasis on leadership—by principals, teacher-coaches, even by the students themselves. Families get involved in weekend workshops that help them be better advocates for their kids, and sometimes prompt parents to get a GED or go on to college themselves.

These are not charter schools. “Our schools are under union contract,” Melanie says. Teachers and principals are paid by the district; Partnership for Los Angeles Schools money goes into a separate foundation and is used for the 50-member team of teacher-coaches, the CEO, and the academic advisers, among others.

Restorative justice programs—promoting ways to resolve conflicts and ensure respect for one another—are offered to some degree in all schools. Other emphases are determined by each school. As pilot programs prove successful, they can then be implemented in the district at large. “The Partnership is about capacity, scalability, and

what goes on firsthand. She regularly visits the schools, meets with the principals, talks with the students. “The beneficiaries of what you’re doing deserve to see the face and know the person behind the check,” Melanie says, “because the kids ask, ‘Why are you doing this?’ And I say, ‘Because you’re worth it.’ Poverty does not equal destiny. I believe that.”

“Melanie is vice-chairman of the board,” notes Joan Sullivan, CEO of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools. “She was an early funder and visionary, and she hasn’t taken her foot off the gas. She’s generating ideas all the time. In this sector there’s often a lack of continuity. The tenure of the superintendent is too short; reform efforts come and go. But the Lundquists have made a sustained commitment over time to our highest-need schools. The Partnership is there for the long haul, and the students and families deserve that commitment.”

Their 10-year pledge is now

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MELANIE LUNDQUIST



sustainability,” says Melanie. “Those three things have been important since the beginning.”

The results have been impressive. From July 2008 to 2015–16, suspensions dropped from 21 percent to 3 percent, and graduation rates more than doubled from 36 percent to 77 percent. Math and English language arts scores have improved dramatically at individual schools. Perhaps the biggest change is the widespread expectation that students at these schools can and will succeed and go on to college.

Melanie is committed to seeing

winding down, but the commitment evidently will continue. “It’s likely that we’ll recommit to a program of eight to ten years,” says Melanie, who hopes “to have other foundations and more diversity in the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools. Everybody needs to get into the game.”

While the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools and the Torrance Memorial Medical Center have received the greatest “investments”—Melanie’s word—she has served on a number of boards of other institutions, but not merely for the privilege, she insists. “The reason to

be on a board is to bring resources and results, and build something. I’m not doing it to watch how they’re spending the money. If you don’t trust the group, you shouldn’t be giving them money. I stay on a board if I feel I can move things forward. If I’ve done that, I get off and make room for someone else.” Then she laughs and admits, “I like to be a committee of one. I like to get things done myself.”

Among the groups that have benefited is the California Science Center. Located next to USC, the popular museum is run by the state, offers free admission charge, and is filled with interactive exhibits. It’s also home to the space shuttle *Endeavour*, thanks to the Lundquists’ last-minute gift of \$2 million. Melanie had just finished co-chairing a \$165 million capital campaign for the center not long after NASA decided to distribute its retired shuttles to institutions around the country.

“The Science Center wrote an application,” Melanie remembers. “The cost was \$14 million to decommission it, decontaminate it, and get it to L.A. It was worth so much more!”

NASA did visit the site, and with three or four months to raise the money, the center had come up with about \$12 million. But time was running out. “We wanted to have the *Endeavour*, but without the money it would have gone to Texas,” Melanie says. Angeleno pride carried the day.

“Philanthropic dollars are precious,” Melanie continues. “We can’t afford not to utilize them. That’s why we choose what we’ll do. Good education and good health are basics for society...and our two main things. Some philanthropists say, ‘This group is lucky to have me.’ Not us. I’m lucky to have the groups. They’ve given me the opportunity to make a difference, to do something meaningful.” ♥

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